

**Presence and Engagement
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To speak 'people'¹

When I was growing up in São Paulo, Brazil, in the 1970s & 80s no one talked about inter-religious dialogue. I don't even think I'd heard the word "interfaith" until many years later. My life and the life of my church were all about growing the parish, evangelising those who were "lost", basically, bringing as many people to church as you could. It was about numbers, though there was certainly genuine care for those who were brought to church. And the churches grew quite a lot.

People's religious convictions and affiliations fell under 4 main headings:

1. Catholic
2. Evangelical (which lumped all Protestants, Pentecostals & everyone else into the same pot)
3. Spiritists, who were the ones that practiced Candomblé, Macumba or Kardecists
4. Jewish

Surely in a city of 15 million people there were lots of others, and there are plenty of ways to judge and evaluate both the categories and terms used to divide people into such groups. But that's not what we're here to talk about.

Today I live in Birmingham, about a 10min walk from HMP Birmingham, in Winson Green. Some think of it as one of the dodgy parts of Birmingham. What does it matter?

There are two Anglican churches within easy walking distance of my home and quite a few churches of other denominations. All with their strengths and with people who are working to see the church thrive, and with their weaknesses, some busier categorising the population than actually getting to know their neighbours. There are more categories than what I grew up with in Brazil, and I'm sure in many ways they are more accurate in terms of how the neighbourhood people actually self-identify in terms of their religious background or convictions. Yet still so many of the conversations I hear, in and out of church, reflect a concern about decline, about budgets, about how can we better strategize, have better programmes or tap into more resources so as to keep the ship floating. A thriving church is seen as one into which more people are going and where the services are full people.

Of course there are many good programmes and good resources out there to help the church think about its presence in the neighbourhood, to think about how to engage with others in a multi-cultural society. Many of you are involved in such things. I'm not against a thriving, growing church. Not at all.

¹ This title comes from a theme in Willie James Jennings' commentary *Acts*, in the series *Belief: A theological commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2017, p. 30.

But I'm asking about the mission and the very being of the church – is it very different in 21st century Britain than it was in mid-to-late 20th century Brazil? What are we missing if nearly all our energy, focus and resources are about bringing people into the church and ensuring the church's relevance within a constantly changing society?

Has relevance replaced love at the heart of what it means to be God's church?

We are exactly in between Ascension and Pentecost. What an exciting time! We have seen the resurrected Christ, wined and dined with him over the past few days and tried to understand what sort of special gift Jesus spoke of as he ascended into heaven. And now we wait in the upper room for that gift. Waiting and praying. Praying and waiting.

In the text of Acts 1, Matthias is chosen to replace Judas, the traitor. Matthias is one of the ones who had been with them from the beginning, since the baptism in the Jordan until the resurrection.

If you want to read these narratives anew for your church, read Willie James Jennings' commentary on the book of Acts in the Belief series. It's brilliant!

As Jennings tells the story of the first 2 chapters of Acts:

Like the others Matthias will wait for the Spirit to come and the Spirit to speak and then he will know what he must do with the others for the sake of Jesus. If he is the right one then God has done to him what God does to all those who hear the words of Jesus – sits them down, fills them with hope, and asks them to join the others in prayer. The church is about to be constituted by the Spirit and the opening up of lives to the world.

Whatever ideas of leadership Peter and the other apostles were imagining, they could not anticipate what God was about to do. A common thing, a selection process, has been placed in an extraordinary setting, in the upper room before Pentecost. From this moment forward every common thing of the disciples of Jesus, every administrative act, every bureaucratic gesture exists in the posture of waiting and stands in the shadow cast by the Holy Spirit and within the necessary work of prayer.

Jennings, pp. 26-27

Elsewhere Jennings suggests, "Not one person in a position of leadership in the book of Acts is doing what he or she wants to be doing."

Pentecost is the beginning of a community broken open by the sheer act of God. Indeed it is a community created by the Spirit precisely in the breaking open. God has come to them, on them, with them. This moment echoes Mary's intimate moment. The Holy Spirit again overshadows. This time the Spirit creates joining. The followers of Jesus are being connected in a way that joins them to people in the most intimate space of voice, memory, sound, body, land and place. It is language that runs through all of these.

There is a saying, “to speak a language is to speak a people.” Pentecost is a miracle of hearing; it is also a miracle in mouths and bodies. God, like a lead dancer, is taking hold of her partners, drawing them close saying, “step this way and now this direction.” Speaking another language is born not of the desire of the disciples, but of God. It signifies all that is essential to learning a language... this is not what the disciples imagined or hoped would manifest the power of the Holy Spirit. To learn a language requires submission to a people. Even in the person of a single teacher, the learner must submit to that single voice, learning what the words mean as they are bound to events, songs, sayings, jokes, everyday practices, habits of mind and body, all within a land and the journey of a people. Anyone who has learned another language other than their native tongue knows how humbling learning can actually be... “There comes a crucial moment in the learning of any language, if one wishes to reach fluency, then enunciation requirements and repetition must give way to sheer wanting. Some people learn a language out of gut-wrenching determination born of necessity. Most, however, who enter a lifetime of fluency, do so because at some point in time they learn to love it” (Jennings, pp 29-30).

They fall in love with the sounds... and if that love is complete... they come to love the people, the food, the faces, the songs, the happiness, the sadness, the ambiguity, the truth. And they love the place, the earth those people call their land, their home.

Speak a language, speak a people. God speaks people, fluently. “And God, with all the urgency that is with the Holy Spirit, wants the disciples of his only begotten Son to speak people fluently, too” (Jennings, p. 29-30).

Learning to speak ‘people’ fluently, is what we’re about as Christians. Whatever you may think God’s mission or God’s work is about, one thing is certain – we have no part in God’s mission if we cannot learn to love as God loves. And that’s learning to speak ‘people.’ Not because we have titles of interfaith advisers or vicars or bishops or church leaders, but because God loves all of God’s creation and because in the Incarnation, God showed us what it means to be human.

The wonder of the book of Acts is that the Spirit opens up this revolution and shapes the church in ways that none of its leaders, none of Christ’s followers or their enemies could have imagined. The Spirit creates something new. The Spirit is still creating something new.

The edge effect

In the natural sciences there is the concept of the ‘edge effect.’ You might have a lake and forest, a field and a stream. The edge is the place, or the places, where these two different eco systems meet.

Biologists have found that while each separate sphere might have life that is unique to itself, there are forms of life that can only exist at the edge. They do not thrive in the forest on their own or in the lake. They thrive only at the edge. It is a niche species made possible because of the edge.

Could it be that God is calling the church again to learn to live on the edge? We have to learn how to be new together – this is the niche species that the Spirit makes possible. We need Christians who are fluent in the language of gathered church and fluent in the language of people. This is you.

Christians who know and are willing to meet other people, encounter them and befriend them in ways that move beyond just trying to get them from their eco system into the CofE or just trying to live in their eco-system, or in the eco-system of 'multi-cultural Britain.'

How do we live our lives openly and truthfully as Christians in our neighbourhoods, not just when we are gathered with other Christians, but when we're not in our own comfortable eco-system?

Perhaps a more important question is: what are we losing if we don't go where the Spirit is acting?

In Acts 10 we read the story of the encounter between Cornelius and Peter. You know the narrative. Peter is on the roof. He's tired and hungry and falls into a trance. That great sheet comes down with all sorts of unclean animals, the sorts of food he, as a good Jew, should not eat. Despite numerous attempts to get him to eat, he refuses. Eventually he accepts the invitation to go to meet Cornelius and travels with his friends to Cornelius' home. There the Spirit of God does amazing things and both Peter and Cornelius are surprised and in wonder.

Acts 10 is an edge effect.

Peter is one eco-system: the Jewish expression of God's people, who knows what it means to be a people constituted by Torah and to live accordingly. Cornelius is the other eco-system – the Gentiles, the outsiders. Each can only exist as they are in their separate eco-systems.

But then the Spirit interrupts them both and makes possible something new.

It's not about getting Peter to become a Gentile or Cornelius to become a Jew. It's about a new niche species made possible only at that edge., made possible only because of the Holy Spirit.

Now, it's about tending the edge. In human ecology, by analogy, that diversity has to be tended.

It can be harmful and violent, or it can be beneficial and totally new.

It took the vision, it took the sheet for Peter to go to the edge.

It's always more comfortable to stay in your habitat.

How is the church tending the edges? Are we attuned to the edges at all and willing, like Peter, actually to go and to be transformed.

What are we losing if we do not? You see, it was as if Peter & Cornelius are on two sides of a very big wall. The Spirit of God was speaking to both of them. Had they not encountered one another, each would not have heard what the Spirit was saying to the other. What are we not hearing because we are not tending to the edges? In all our work for the church and engagement with people of other traditions, whose voices are we not hearing? And why? What can we do to get others to the table or to go to a table where we are not in control of the outcomes?

It is fundamental to understand that Peter did not want or pray or desire to listen to Cornelius. He thought he could be a very good follower of Jesus without doing anything with Gentiles. But the Spirit

showed him that in fact, he wasn't following Jesus at all if he was not going to hear the voices of others and be transformed himself.

A number of years ago I had the privilege to participate in gathering and then to be part of a drafting group for the document, *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct*. I believe you know the text. It's on the Presence & Engagement website, too. I was there as part of the delegation of the World Evangelical Alliance.

It started off as an inter-faith project, but pretty quickly the representatives of other faiths told the Christians, 'You can't even agree amongst yourselves about the ethics of witness and mission. How do you expect to come to an agreement with all of us?' Too true.

So it became an intra-Christian project between the WCC, PCID and the WEA. One of the extraordinary things about those meetings that came out as we gathered over the course of 4-5 years was the time and patience it takes to build friendships with people who are very different from us. And sometimes, most often in fact, that difference wasn't because I was there as an Evangelical woman from Brazil engaged in dialogue with a Syrian Orthodox priest from Kerala, India. My struggle was more with the Pentecostal pastor from London who was also there as part of the WEA's delegation. Likewise, the criticism we received for being part of that collaboration with others came in its most fiercest form from our 'own'. This is always a challenge and very likely outcome of being with others, of being at an edge.

That project was a project in learning to speak 'people' – all people, with all their sharp words, all their criticisms, theological differences, liturgical practices, all of it. It was hard work. And it's not over. That is the challenge of the Spirit in Acts. Are we willing to be that disrupted, that uncomfortable, that unpopular for the sake of hearing the Spirit's voice even in the ones we really don't get along with or agree with?

In my dodgy end of Birmingham we have a little group called Companions for Hope. On the 1st Wednesday of every month there's something called Neighbour Nights. It's open to all and is held in a community hall. The food is provided by The Real Junk Food Project Birmingham on a pay as you feel basis. At Neighbour Nights, one of the things that we do is provide a space for anyone to speak about what they see happening in and around this area. Some talk about the problems of drug dealers in Summerfield Park, some talk about the "issue" of homelessness and the growing number of people on the streets and by the canalside, especially now that the weather is warmer. There might even be a homeless person or two who come to Neighbour Nights. There is also a retired school teacher who is constantly trying to find creative ways for people to come out of their situations of poverty and distress and she challenges everyone at Neighbour Nights to do so. And the conversations carry on. At the last Neighbour Nights there were about 80 people of all ages, backgrounds, faiths, no faith, rich and poor.

Food brings people together. Neighbour Nights has also enabled the gifts in the community to be discovered, to be used and appreciated. The woman who cooks the food is from Eastern Europe. She is unemployed & struggles a lot. She gets all sorts of criticisms and nasty things said about her on a daily basis, but in this place, she gets to share her gifts as a chef. There are people at Neighbour Nights who voted for Brexit because they feel alienated and disenfranchised by 'foreigners.' Now they are eating and

enjoying the food cooked by one such 'foreigner.' They've not become fast friends and they might not agree on most things, but they are together, gathered around food and conversation and able to share their gifts in ways that build the other up rather than bring them down. It is a personal place where life happens and where life can thrive.

It's not a perfect gathering. It doesn't solve problems. It's hard work. But it is an edge, and edge where certain unique forms of life can thrive and where people's gifts can be shared and enjoyed by others. Neighbour Nights needs tending. Constantly. And we always need to be thinking, (i) who's not here? And why? And (ii) where do we need to go? Where are the other edges and are we called, like Peter, to go?

It is always easier to be the host rather than to receive hospitality. The host has the power, controls the invitation list, the menu, the entertainment. But going, as Peter did, means following the Spirit and being in places we don't really want to be in and in conversations with people we don't really like or get along with.

Learning to speak 'people' means asking the question: what's on the sheet for me or for my diocese? What is unclean in my context that God has already made clean? What's on the sheet?

Learning to speak 'people' means being far less concerned with being relevant, and much more concerned about learning to love, to desire as God desires, which means going and tending to those edges where you'll encounter all that is on the sheet.

Pentecost is coming. Be prepared to be surprised! Prepare to speak 'people' fluently.